THE FIRE DOWN BELOW

Welcome to the New Weird America: a groundswell musical movement rising out of the USA's backwoods, one that offers an alternative to the no wave revivalism of the nation's urban centres. Loosely called free folk, the music draws on an intoxicating range of avant garde sounds, from acoustic roots to drone, ritualistic performance, Krautrock, ecstatic jazz, hillbilly mountain music, psychedelia, archival blues and folk sides, Country funk and more. David Keenan takes the stagecoach to Vermont's Brattleboro Free Folk Festival, where he meets prime movers Sunburned Hand Of The Man (pictured right), Scorces, Matt Valentine/Tower Recordings, Dredd Foole, Six Organs Of Admittance, Chris Corsano & Paul Flaherty, and more. Photos: Chris Buck

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Late Saturday night at the Cottonmill, a huge warehouse space in downtown Brattleboro in the state of Vermont, Texan pedal steel player and throat conjurer Heather Leigh Murray is tearing at the strings of her instrument with her bare hands, her eyes bobbing like pennies in her skull. As part of the Scorces duo she shares with guitarist Christina Carter, she's going head to head with another free improvising unit, saxophonist Paul Flaherty and drummer Chris Corsano, whose lungs, fists, elbows and heads have already pushed this impromptu ensemble way past any notions of dialogue or musical exchange and out into the realms of pure spontaneous sound. As Flaherty and Carter make for the flanks, the central kernel of Corsano and Murray blur into a motive cacophony. Corsano's well-aimed fist knocks dents into his cymbals, while Murray collapses in sobs over her floored pedal steel, tearing electric revenant forms from an instrument that's more usually associated with the ass-clenching constrictions of weepy Country ballads. Out front, a long slow scream travels between audience members, as they pick up on the prodigious energy coming from the stage and start channelling it right back. Caught up in this bacchanalian loop, it feels like the entire venue is dissolving in sound.

"I am the music," Murray later insists, echoing the late free saxophonist Albert Ayler. "There is no separation." As she's led away to have her lacerated hands bandaged, Boston's Sunburned Hand Of The Man begin setting up, with three drum kits positioned in the middle of the audience, percussionists all over the room, a wall of guitars and a holster full of brass, electronics and bass. Vocalist, MC and sometime drummer John Moloney calls out a dedication to James Brown on his birthday and bassist Rob Thomas hits a groove that sounds like Captain Beefheart's "Big Eyed Beans From Venus" as the sprawling orchestra explodes the already volcanic energy levels. Soon the whole house is on its feet, and it's impossible to tell who's playing and who's a spectator once they drop into an acid hillbilly stomp and Moloney takes a cartwheeling flip off the stage. Drummer Corsano re-enters the fray, with guest percussionist Tim Barnes beating out a barrage on the snare Corsano has balanced on his head, while Murray also returns, a vision in plasters and a gold flecked 70s gown and scarf. She attacks the drums in a blur of sticks before breaking off into a series of moves that are half ghost dance, half *Saturday Night Fever*. This is improvised music that impacts on the ass as much as the third eye, that draws from mountain music, Country blues, HipHop, militant funk and psychedelia as much as free jazz. And the group look fantastic, a crew of benign freak brothers and sisters, greasers and street toughs, all chasing the sound of the no-mind. "I was telling everyone before we played that I'd slip a knife between the ribs of the first man to play rock," Moloney shrugs. "But look what happened."

Welcome to the New Weird America.

The past few years have seen an explosion in the sort of genre mangling grassroots activity that Sunburned Hand Of The Man, Flaherty/Corsano and Scorces represent. Mostly based outside of the major US cities, disparate, culturally disenfranchised cells have begun to telegraph between each other, forming alliances via limited handmade releases and a vast subterranean network of samizdat publications, musician- and fan-run labels and distributors like Apostasy, Child Of Microtones, Eclipse, Ecstatic Yod, Fusetron, Qbico, Seres, Siwa, Soundatone, Spirit Of Orr, Time-Lag, U-Sound, Vhf and Wholly Other. This particular cottage industry came into existence initially out of necessity, as no one else would touch this music. Since then it has grown in strength and ambition, developing into what musician Ben Chasny (of Six Organs Of Admittance and Comets On Fire) now describes as a conscious attempt to create "a web of inspiration and beauty that will bypass all of the mundane aspects of whatever we call art, like museums and galleries and eBay and bullshit record collecting".

Self-publishing has always enabled challenging works of art to interact with the world while they're at their most potent. It's also a measure of artistic seriousness. And just as small press journals provided a platform for otherwise unpublishable work in the 60s and 70s, so today the increasing affordability and accessibility of home publishing and CD burning, along with the globe-spanning reach of the Internet, have conspired to energise a new generation of fringe operators. With the threat of an increasingly censorious US state and the blinkered consensus reiterated by the 'news-entertainment complex', the need to forge alternative channels of communication feels more urgent than ever.

The Brattleboro Free Folk Festival, headlined on the first night by Sunburned Hand Of The Man, represents the first major coming together of this vague movement, an attempt to muster the same recurrent, archetypal forms that archivist and mystic Harry Smith saw manifest in the American folk music of the early 20th century and documented in his *Anthology Of American Folk Music*. At this year's Free Folk Fest in the first week of May, outsider voices from an earlier generation were joined by lone visionaries, hermetic isolationists, young marginalised artists, hippy revolutionaries, Country punks, ex-cons, project kids, avant experimentalists, luddite refuseniks, psychedelic rockers and assorted misfits in an attempt to make space for an alternative American narrative, irreconcilable with the prevailing neoconservative vision of the 'New American Century'. And like Smith before them, many of the main players regard their music as a potential catalyst for social change.

Although the players' interpretation of what constitutes 'folk music' is unusually wide, they all relate to traditional folk forms in several significant ways. Primarily, the music is an expression of a self-supporting community of likeminded individuals, all dedicated to finding their own voice and creating art as free from outside influence as possible. You really have to *know* what you're looking for, as many recordings come adorned with little more than a kind of system of sigils, a code that provides an effective bulwark against potentially corrupting influences. This culture has sprung up around live music, with the various recordings coming out of it serving more as rough-ass archival snapshots or documents of work in progress than 'finished' commercial product. Indeed, events like the Free Folk Fest feel more like social get-togethers than festivals. Everyone seems to know each other, and most of the musicians have played together before. Over two days, members are shed and traded, line-ups bolstered and diminished. Much of the music draws inspiration from American folk and roots, with many of the musicians citing as influences the likes of Blind Willie Johnson, The Memphis Jug Band, Dock Boggs, Robbie Basho, John Fahey and Sandy Bull, as well as fringe British artists like The Incredible String Band, Roy Harper, Simon Finn and Wizz Jones. But improvisation and the application of the drone open up these new folk musicians to the roar of the cosmos. In the process, they have stripped improvisation of its jazz-informed reputation as a cerebral discipline and rebirthed it as *the* original, primal musical gesture, reminding us that it was always folk music's most natural mode of expression.

At Brattleboro, guitarists like Glenn Jones (of Boston's Cul De Sac) Jack Rose (of the improvising ensemble Pelt), and Willie 'Gutbucket' Lane took the protean forms of Basho, Fahey and Johnson, and walked them deep into virgin territory, with an attack that was rock-informed and an approach to structure that was hypnotic, non-linear and supremely elastic. "In Pelt we made connections between Indian music, old time and blues very early on," Jack Rose confirms. "Plus, hearing a tape of [minimalist composer] Henry Flynt in 1997 showed us it was possible to put those connections into practice." Elsewhere, the Son Of Earth-Flesh On Bone trio utilised an old Dansette, wired cymbals, contact mics and the crackle of cheap amplification to activate a low level drone that sounded like an orchestra of cranked 78s whose grooves had worn right through. Joshua Burkett's entrancing backwoods songs were made flesh by guests from the Sunburned camp, while guitarist and vocalist Dredd Foole – "*the* history of free folk in Brattleboro", according to Chris Corsano's introduction – took the free associative sound poetry of *Starsailor*-era Tim Buckley to rapturous new levels, with the aid of his shadow Ed Yazjjian on violin. But more than anyone, Matthew Valentine and Erika Elder best caught the spirit of the event, both as The MV & EE Medicine Show and as the central axis of the freeform Tower Recordings collective. Indeed it was Valentine, alongside his buddy Ron Schneiderman of Spirit Of Orr Records, who put the fest together.

"For me the Free Folk Fest was all about free thinking folk," Valentine declares. We're sitting at a table on the third floor porch of his 'sky house', hidden away in the middle of the woods just south of Brattleboro and halfway up a dirt track known as the East Mountain Road. We're eye-level with the tops of the trees, the local beer is good and our conversation is punctuated by the occasional drilling of woodpeckers. "There were all these people who needed to be brought together," he continues. "There are so many similar elements that are running through their art, even though on the surface players like, say, Paul Flaherty and Jack Rose seem very different. Yet they're coming at music from the exact same place. Everyone on the bill is into freedom on a social level, a spiritual level and – especially – on a musical level. It was great to see all these people together, people who I think of as being part of, for lack of a better term, the sub-underground, this periphery that's known in certain circles but aren't seen as being linked to any particular music. It was also intended as a nod to the progenitors of this whole scene, inviting people who are still at it, like Flaherty, who has been releasing his own records to little acclaim since the 70s, and [gonzo folk artist] Michael Hurley, who has been going, I think, since about 1965. They're both still doing the same thing they were doing back then and that's what I think the free folk ethos is, people who have just stuck to their laurels, producing the most completely independent music, free of the confines of popularity, scenes or movements, and concentrating on focusing on their own art and voice and dedicating themselves to that. To me, everyone who performed is a scholar of the form and it was nice to have them all in the one room."

Although he's originally from upstate New York, Valentine moved down to Manhattan in 1994, where he put together the Beefheart/Pussy Galore-inspired unit Memphis Luxure, with Pat Gubler (who has cut a

Previous page: Sunburned Hand Of the Man in Boston, June 2003 (John Moloney second from right).
Right: Guttersnipe: Chris Corsano

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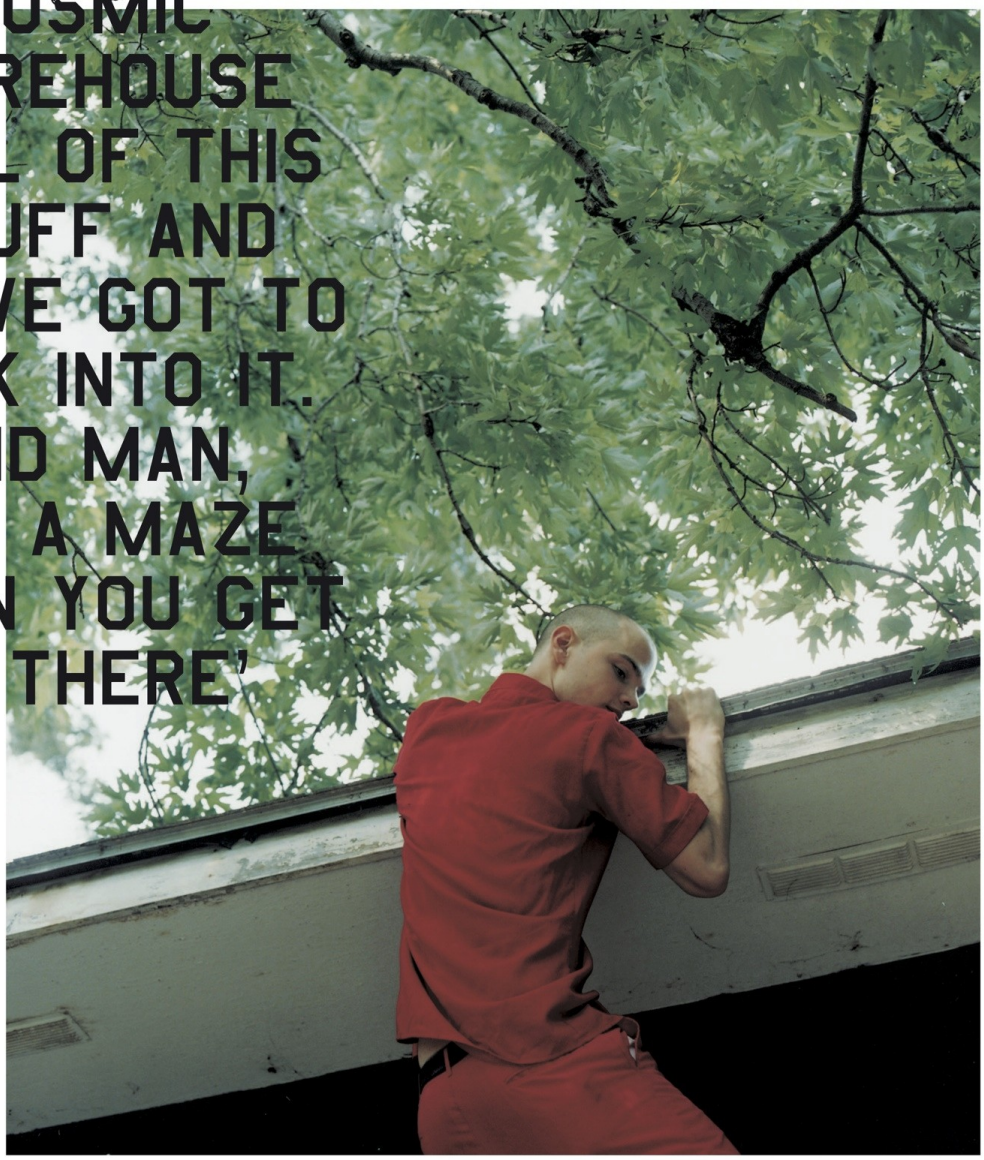
‘THERE’S A COSMIC WAREHOUSE FULL OF THIS STUFF AND YOU’VE GOT TO JACK INTO IT. AND MAN, IT’S A MAZE WHEN YOU GET IN THERE’



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handful of bewitching psychedelic folk records under the pseudonym PG Six) and Marc Wolf aka Spanish Wolfman. “We were full-on electric and I really wanted to stick to acoustic sounds, so we became Tower Recordings,” he explains. “Tower are based around free improvisation and raga music, where there’s a lot less form and it’s more about the sound itself and making sure the emotion of the environment is captured. We never play the same way twice. There are certain themes that we like to explore but in terms of where it’s going to go or even a tonal centre, that’s really dependent on the weather and star signs. It just seemed ridiculous to play things the same way each time, I mean, you ever brush your teeth the same way?” Valentine likens Tower’s musical approach to channelling, insisting that when they play live it often feels as if they’re simply drawing imminent forms straight from the air. “I think the music just exists, it’s out there and you’ve got to find it,” he asserts. “There’s like a cosmic warehouse full of this stuff and you’ve got to jack into it. And, man, it’s a maze when you get in there.”

The first Tower Recordings album, 1995’s *Rehearsals For Roseland*, was a good, if slightly generic, indie rock record, but with 1998’s *Let The Cosmos Ring* – essentially a selection of solo cuts recorded under the name Planet TR – Tower really came into their own, with a haunting assemblage of dislocated ballads, snake-charming instrumentals and Krautrock klang. Still, it was 2001’s *Folk Scene* that fully established them as avatars of a new root-quaking vibration. Drawing on a huge ensemble of players including Tim Barnes, Valentine’s partner Erika Elder, Helen Rush, Pat Gubler and New Zealand sound artist Dean Roberts, *Folk Scene* is a tautly structured collage of beautiful song fragments whose logic consciously mirrors the quixotic twists and turns of the Incredible String Band’s 1968 classic *The Hangman’s Beautiful Daughter*. It remains one of the scene’s founding documents.

“That Incredible String Band record is definitely a flux in their career,” Valentine confirms. “And for me, *Folk Scene* is the fulcrum of our catalogue. I wanted to make something that was really obvious to people. I think there was a lot of myth and obliqueness surrounding Tower. So we made things a lot more obvious, starting with the title. It was meant to be an epochal release, clearing out our own storehouse so we could fill it back up with other things. Our new disc, *The Futuristic Folk Of The Tower Recordings*, directly relates to it. If you look at them both together they’re like sister lovers, whereas *Folk Scene* is sort of fragments, little miniatures in a maximal context, *The Futuristic Folk…* is the opposite: longer songs in a minimal setting.”

Since moving to rural Vermont from the city a year ago, Valentine has increased the frequency of broadcasts via his own home-run label, Child Of Microtones, documenting his solo experiments across a variety of traditional instrumentation. Given the logistics involved in getting the sprawling Tower line-up together in one place, Valentine has also launched The MV & EE Medicine Show, a duo with Erika Elder that models itself on the travelling minstrel revues of old. They played the opening night of the fest, the line-up expanded to include Tom Carter of Texas psych group Charalambides (a trio completed by the aforementioned Scorces duo Christina Carter and Heather Leigh Murray) on electric guitar, while Tower Recordings reconvened for the second night, when the fest relocated to the Hampshire College Tavern over in Amherst. There, Tower were joined by Dredd Foole, providing some spooked wordless vocals. “When folks come up and join us, like Dredd did at the fest, they’re always on the same page,” Valentine says. “We know they’re OK and that they’re going to find the same direction, you don’t have to give them a map. It seems to me, especially living out in the country, you get in tune with the nature, the woods, and there’s a certain sound. If you’re not harmonious with nature then the music doesn’t sound right out here. It has really helped my ears being away from the city. You can hear the intervals between the notes a lot better, so if we’re doing more Indian based music or blues stuff, they’re very similar but the microtones and the inflection is where it’s at, the delivery of it. It’s funny, a different kind of chaotic music comes out of the woods than the city.”

The Vermont area has a long history of radical chaos. It’s still dotted with communes and ‘back to the land’ outposts, entrenched here since the late 60s. The first night of the Folk Fest was originally scheduled at a communally run restaurant/coffee house/performance space called The Common Ground in Brattleboro, but at the last minute the place had its electricity cut. They’re now fighting closure. A key 60s activist, Marty Jezer, now contributes a radical weekly column to *The Brattleboro Reformer*, where Erika Elder also works. In *Total Loss Farm: A Year In The Life*, journalist Ray Mungo recalled his experiments in communal living, comparing the Vermont area with that other countercultural lightning rod, California. “Vermont is a place of strong white magick, a place friendly to adventurers of the mind and body,” he wrote, contrasting it with the black magick of California. “Vermont belongs to The Band,” he insisted. “California to The Rolling Stones.”

“When we first started playing, we felt we needed to learn a couple of tunes to please the bar crowd and fill up some time,” drawls John Moloney, casting his mind back to the earliest, riotous shows by his group Sunburned Hand Of The Man. “So we learned “Sympathy For The Devil”. Fun stuff.” Modelled more along the lines of a streetfighting gang than a hippy commune, Sunburned Hand Of The Man don’t drink soya. “There’s a new hippy here in the cities of America,” Moloney spits, “and that’s the tattooed vegan. In all fairness I’ve never met more paranoid and self-centred human assholes than the few vegans I’ve been unfortunate enough to come across in my life. No meat, no milk, no fish, no eggs, no cheese equals no soul. Fuck hippies. We don’t adhere to any utopian concept or live by any manifestos, but it would be safe to say that we think like a load of disenchanted Americans who don’t believe what the news or the government says, don’t buy into mass consumerism and don’t eat at McDonald’s. There are a lot of these folks and they don’t all play music in psychedelic folk ensembles. Sunburned itself is a corrupting influence. Boston is a big city loaded with corrupting influences and we are very proud to walk among them.”

Like Japan’s Acid Mothers Temple Soul Collective, Sunburned operates almost as an extended family for all kinds of dropouts, punks, poets and pugilists, with the mothership berthing countless splinter groups like Enos Slaughter (who feature Sunburned guitarist Marc Orleans, David Shuford from The No-Neck Blues Band and Carter Thornton of IZITITIZ), Franklin’s Mint and Healers Barrel. They’ve also had to put up with the same amount of abuse and suspicion from their neighbours as Kawabata and co, suffering everything from physical assaults to nails in their tyres. “I went to see Acid Mothers Temple on their first USA tour in

Erika Elder & Matt Valentine, aka Tower Recordings, at their ‘sky house’ in Brattleboro, Vermont

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"PRETENTIOUS ASSHOLES, ARM FOLDERS, NEGATIVE HIPCATS, THEY'RE EVERYWHERE AND WE'RE OUT TO GET THEM"

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Boston and I was ready for a fuckin' indoor riot," Moloney says. "When they came on I got into it, moving around and such, and this guy comes up to me and says 'Hey man, I really appreciate what you're doing but could you please sit down?' I couldn't believe this clown. I poked him in the chest and told him to go fuck his sister."

Sunburned crawled out of the debris of The Shit-Spangled Banner, whose sole release, 1996's *No Dolby No DBX*, was part of Byron Coley and Thurston Moore's Ass Run series, alongside their sister group The No-Neck Blues Band. The Shit-Spangled Banner consisted of Moloney, Rich Pontius and Rob Thomas, who sold Moloney on the idea that the trio would be a cross between The Melvins and Sonic Youth. They weren't. As their Boston loft space began to fill out with characters like keyboardist Conrad Capistran, percussionist and electronics wizard Chad Cooper and guitarist Marc Orleans, the jams got crazier and the parties got wilder. "But labels like 'jam' and 'Improv' don't fit our way of life," Moloney protests. "Somehow those words make my ghetto bones go cold."

Moloney grew up out in the projects, in veterans' housing in Everett, Massachusetts, about two miles from downtown Boston. "It was crazy," he remembers. "There was a lot of fighting going on and most of it was actually encouraged or not taken seriously by the parents at all. Most of the parents were in their early twenties anyway. There was a lot of open drinking and drugs in the neighbourhood as well, so we were used to seeing these things from an early age. There was also a lot of crazy shit going on all the time; we'd see loads of fistfights and savage beatings. Like most of the kids, I was into *Star Wars*, GI Joe, *Star Trek*, video games and the popular things of the times. But what separated the kids in our neighbourhood from all the non-projects kids was our special talent for mischief and destruction. We got into explosives pretty early. My forte was the pipebomb, I was good at it, really good. We'd make some bombs that were fuckin' powerful. We'd blow up anything: mailboxes, abandoned cars, trash. We even took down a 30 foot tall tree one time. We lived on the top of a very steep hill, and right across the street there was a big park with a huge hill and set of stairs to get to the bottom.

"From an early age we would roll anything round down the hills into the main streets. Tyres, tyres on fire, ghost rider bicycles, shopping carts. It was a long hill, and to roll a tyre and have it go straight onto Broadway into traffic was the prize, because from the top you couldn't see what cars were coming. We would laugh so hard we would piss our pants when we heard the tyres screech and cars crashing into each other. We caused a couple of big accidents. One tyre we rolled had the rim still attached and air still in it, so it got this killer bounce to it and it really picked up speed. This poor bastard happened to be walking by and got nailed by this round monster. He was carrying a bag full of beers that broke all over the ground when he was knocked out. I've never laughed so hard in my life and I still cry laughing when I think about it. We were bastards. Great fun. I miss it."

In high school Moloney soon graduated to the hard stuff and he was arrested at 17 for stealing a car just so he could burn it for the insurance money. Between 17 and 21 he was arrested six times for everything from auto theft, drugs, booze, assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, and default warrants. While he was still at school in 1983, he joined his first group, a breakdancing gang called The Ghetto Breakers. They would walk the streets packing a huge boombox that rattled with the rap of the day, and each member of the crew had their own special move, Moloney's being the handspin. "I could go for hours," he glows. "Though when I try it now my bones feel like they're going to break. After high school ended in 1989, I started hanging out with different crowds. We were basically a weed cult that drove around in a van all day and settled down in a friend's basement to smoke bones, take acid and mescaline, and listen to The Grateful Dead." After four years in a small liberal arts college in western Massachusetts, Moloney returned to Boston and took a job in an Irish bar while drumming with hardcore and punk groups in his spare time, applying an advanced, idiosyncratic drum style that he had intuited by air drumming along to MTV.

"I still don't know how Sunburned happened," he claims. "I just know it feels like it was supposed to, like déjà vu. The line-up was so loose back then that we never considered ourselves a band. I still don't. We're a gang and a family in every sense of the word. The music was just an extension of us hanging out. We did as much filming as music back then, so we were born out of the idea of simply having some good laughs together." Selected highlights from their extensive visual archive are now on a video released on the Italian Qbico label. It's a fantastically revealing document, with surreal drug goofs, mock arguments and prank setpieces, spliced with guerrilla theatre and some powerful live footage. Spanning their entire career, the footage includes early sound art pieces involving microphones used as lassos, and Pigpen-era Grateful Dead-type Country funk reinterpreted by an orchestra with a post-fire music mindset. They've also released a deck of home-burned live CDs and three limited edition LPs, assembled from years of performances and available directly from the group, or via distributors like Father Yod and Eclipse. Early sides like *Mind Of A Brother* are more abstract than the group's current heavily rhythmic incarnation, defined by webs of deep, cold space plotted by constellations of electric guitar and orbited by sunken submarine horns. On later sides like the classic *Jaybird*, reissued on LP by Qbico, they take great lollops towards sustained form with an approach to rhythm that's as tactile and relentlessly rolling as Funkadelic, while a hallelujah chorus broadcast beat satori through sense-destroying levels of FX, buckets of locomotive percussion and distressed, swamp funk keyboards.

"To me, it's always been very organic, whether playing atmospheric droney pieces or some freaked out funk jam," says guitarist Rich Pontius. "We all just play. The only part that's deliberate is that we're all doing our own thing while trying to remain a part of the overall sound. Its not just 11 guys all wigging out simultaneously and without paying any attention to each other. There was a mid-period that I found troublesome, where we seemed to be treading water with the more atmospheric stuff while also occasionally busting out a more structured song, and it never seemed the two forms would coagulate. That has completely faded as an issue for me. We've been doing it for so long and play together so well, and for months now we seem to be having an extended period of really right-on sessions. Which is not to say that every time we strap it on we're making gold. There are still sessions of mediocrity, but it just doesn't matter because the next week, next day or even 30 minutes later we might plug in and melt all our minds." Pontius recalls Sunburned's semi-directed phase with some hilarity. "We used to constantly have these pre-gig huddles where we'd talk about structure very loosely," he laughs. "Like 'Let's keep things real mellow for a while, you two guys start out alone and then eventually we'll build it up after 20 minutes', but then get on stage, toss the charts out the window and dance the A-bomb boogie. Not maliciously or intentionally, it would just happen that way. For me, those huddles became endearingly comical after a while. When the music really takes off and you're playing with a bunch of guys all doing their own thing but unified and making it up as you go, it's the ultimate creative act to me. The space I'm in after finishing a set is like a head rush after really great sex. It's an amazing, liberating feeling."

"We just get on with it the only way we know how," Moloney insists. "And that's all we do. When we first started, I wasn't familiar with free jazz at all. I got some John Coltrane CDs when I was in college. The first one I got was *Sun Ship*. I loved it, the brand new sound to my ears. I got interested in jazz then. Around the same time Thurston Moore wrote up a list of free jazz essentials for The Beastie Boys' *Grand Royal* magazine and that led to deeper digging. I actually owe a lot to The Beastie Boys for opening some musical doors for me. They were also great live back in 1993 when *Check Your Head* came out, switching styles on stage and playing instruments. A real inspiration.

"For me, it has become very spiritual," he continues, "whether we are playing coke rock or clanging bells while someone groans like a dosed goat. I try to look everyone in the eye before we play in front of people. There's always a loose plan that goes right out the window the second we plug in. Always. Like in Brattleboro, the music just took control, the sounds, the power. I feel like we conjure up the sounds from the beyond or from right next door. I honestly feel like we are some sort of channelling device or medium. Not some New Age bullshit but some sort of conscious coincidence. It's a real uplifting experience and we are proud to be the ones to make everyone smile and come out of themselves a little. I saw people dancing that I would swear never danced before. The ultimate goal is, for me, to get folks moving, to get folks involved and ultimately let everybody know that *you can do it too*. Pretentious assholes, arm folders, negative hipcats, they're everywhere and we're out to get them."

"I think someone should analyse the chromosomes of all the people in this group of musicians, all the people who played the Free Folk Fest, and see if they can't work out what the fuck is going on," bursts Heather Leigh Murray, bandaged and high, guzzling pints of coffee the morning after Scorces' electrifying performance with Flaherty and Corsano. "It feels like being a part of some kind of tiny utopia. All the players have this amazing, alive approach to living and making art. I'm still trying to come to terms with it all, especially with what happened last night. I feel it's going to have huge repercussions in my life."

Murray started out playing avant psychedelia with her then partner Shawn McMillen in a duo known as Ash Castles On The Ghost Coast, who released one beautiful CD on Tom and Christina Carter's Wholly Other label. When Ash Castles ended, Murray joined Charalambides and formed the Scorces duo with Carter, singing and playing organ, cuatro (a four stringed Venezuelan instrument) and, initially, guitar. Between them, Carter and Murray have pioneered a striking, instinctive approach to their respective instruments, combining the gospel blues of Blind Willie Johnson with repeating, percussive patterns, echoes of the sanctified dolceola music of Washington Phillips and the kind of lacerating, untutored slide work that Lydia Lunch used on early Teenage Jesus tracks. In the process they've exploded the cliched

Top: Sunburned Hand Of The Man's bonfire of the insanities
Bottom: Dredd Foole.

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notion of what constitutes feminine energy, stripping out terms like 'ethereal' and moving out into territories that are uniquely heavy, both sonically and emotionally. "I think you're automatically labelled when you're a woman playing in this context," Murray agrees. "And there are always certain descriptions thrown at you. There's definitely a stereotypical idea regarding what kind of levels you can reach while you're playing. That's what was incredible about this last Scorces tour and about this community of musicians. We blow all that away. There are so many women involved: Erika Elder, Marcia from Double Leopards, Tara Burke from Fursaxa… I'm also a graphic designer for the Pauline Oliveros Foundation in Houston and we bring a lot of groups over to play, people like Peter Brötzmann's Die Like A Dog and The Schlippenbach Trio, and I love those guys so much. But in that area of music, in European improvisation, there's a very masculine energy and there's less involvement of women, less of a place for female energies. There's a place for all that masculine energy too, but to be a part of something like this, where I can play with other women, it's really inspiring. Heaviness can be reached!"

Although she started off on the guitar, Murray's main instrument is now the pedal steel, which she picked up on the urging of the Texan pedal steel player Susan Alcorn, after she witnessed the first ever Scorces show. "[Alcorn] said, 'I'm going to bring you a pedal steel tomorrow. I'm not going to show you how to tune it, I'm not going to show you how to pick it, anything. I want you to find your own language on it completely.' So the next day we all met up at Pauline Oliveros's mother's house and she brought the pedal steel and just gave it to me. I was immediately drawn into it. It was the first instrument that really felt like an extension of me. Rather than me playing something, it was me playing me. So I focused on it. It's a very magical instrument.

"I really feel like it's such a part of my life now, whereas when I first started doing music it was kind of separate," she continues. "It's just one thing completely and this group of people, this whole circle, we're all just blurring into one thing. *I am the music* and I don't even have a choice, I cannot stop. It's overwhelming. There was a point last night when it was over and I was collapsed on the floor. I don't know how long I was lying there but I remember looking up at Christina, Chris and Paul and it felt like they were just going woo-woo-woo, just surging in and out of reality. I couldn't even understand what they were saying. I felt like I had come out of the womb, it was a rebirth thing, completely. And what was important about it was that two men and two women had achieved it. There's a lot of feminine energy in this scene and that really is key. For instance, I remember a show we played at the Yodspace in Florence, MA with Dredd Foole. He was out in the audience and we were up on stage and when he finally came in I felt as if he was a siren, out there in the distance, just calling to us."

Ask any of these musicians where the initial energising spark for the New Weird America came from and they'll point you right back to Dredd Foole's epochal 1994 solo album, *In Quest Of Tense*. Alongside hermetic lone operatives like Jandek, Sun City Girls and Loren MazzaCane Connors, Dredd Foole's freeform take on folk song loosened shackles and inspired direct action across the country. Now based in Brattleboro, Dredd Foole aka Dan Ireton has fully integrated himself into the new generation of musicians and has just released *The Whys Of Fire*, a clutch of primal improvisations cut with a new version of his legendary 1980s hardcore group The Din, this time around featuring Thurston Moore, Chris Corsano and the members of Pelt. "When I released *In Quest Of Tense*, it disappeared into a black hole," Ireton recalls. "I got no reaction from that record at all. No press, nobody ever said a word to me, whatever. That was a crushing blow actually. It wasn't a conscious decision but after that I stopped doing music for a bit. But then recently, over the past three or four years, people have started coming out of the woodwork and saying that they loved that record. I'm like, Are you kidding, you've heard that record? Christina Carter and Heather Murray, when I first met them, one of the first things they said was that they loved that record. It has mostly been this younger generation of people that have heard it and liked it. They've told me that it has influenced them and that's blown my mind."

"Dan is definitely a massive blast to the tonal matrix of underground music," Matthew Valentine confirms. "He's always been tapped into these things. He was doing this stuff well before a lot of us were around. He's a veteran and he was coming at it from a post-Stooges thing in the beginning, but he's always been immersed in this kind of improvisational higher key music. He's someone I've always got a lot from because he never gives anything but 150 per cent and when we play with him, like when he joined Tower Recordings at the Folk Fest, he brings out music in me that I might not tap into otherwise." Indeed, a vital precursor to the Free Folk Fest was the reconstituted Din's annual shows on Amherst Common, where they were first joined by pups like Tower Recordings and Sunburned Hand Of The Man.

"Dan Ireton is another person who I am lucky to have shared time with and heard sing face to face, unmediated by a stereo," adds guitarist and vocalist Ben Chasny, aka the one-man West Coast acid folk project Six Organs Of Admittance, and guitarist with Metal punks Comets On Fire. "The only thing more beautiful and powerful than his voice and perception of sound as magic is his caring and loving heart." Chasny couldn't make the Free Folk Fest, but he was surely there in spirit. Everyone speaks of him as playing an essential part in fostering the new consciousness. His own music – spectral webs of rust and drone that reference John Fahey while factoring in wildcard influences like minimalist composition and psychedelic freakbeat – is one of the most glorious manifestations of the New Weird America. Indeed, all over the country there are similarly placed musicians, broadcasting from the margins and interacting with each other across the landmass, from Portland, Oregon's insurgent free rock ensemble Jackie-O Motherfucker (see *The Wire* 226), whose U-Sound label has helped document some of the more interesting fringe activity, through the many tentacles emerging from New York's No-Neck collective (The Suntanama, K-Salvatore, Enos Slaughter, Tenor Rising Drums Expanding) to Greg Weeks's Philadelphia based lysergic folk group Espers, and further Pelt offshoots like Mike Gangloff's all-acoustic fiddle, banjo and guitar trio Black Twig Pickers, based out in the mountains of Virginia. There are also disconnected loners working a parallel stream, like the Florida based home recording folk unit Iron And Wine.

"I started playing more folk oriented music because I could play it by myself," Chasny explains. "I kept having problems with band members, and the autonomy of a solo unit was appealing, even though the social aspect of a collective was beautiful as well. That is why I have structured the Six Organs to be able to pick up people at any time to play music. Often we will only practise for a few minutes before a show. Sometimes there will be no practice at all, such as when I picked up Chris Corsano to play drums one night at the Sunburned loft. Another thing that draws me towards acoustic instrumentation is that it is a less mediated form of expression than electric music. The acoustic musician is not dependent on the electric company or technology that she or he doesn't understand. I have no doubt that if you put someone like Chris Corsano in front of a laptop computer with some software, he could create the most devastating post-human rhythms right up there with the newest glitch/laptop/whatever artist. But if you took them both out into the desert with some rocks, turtle shells, fists and sand, then Corsano could summon the ancient forces that once only took shape as drawings in hermetic books, while the practitioner of so-called modern music would be left scurrying for protection from the sun. Not that music that uses electricity cannot be transcendental. It's just a matter of studying the forms of sounds that are closer to human existence in order to understand the correspondence with the higher forms, with the heavens." Although Chasny is wary of the straitjacket of ideological dogma, he feels there's a genuine social and political agenda motivating the scene's many operatives.

"I'm not going to make any specific comments as to where all this is situated in the realm of politics," he starts. "All I will say is that voting doesn't really do shit in America anymore, does it? What does it get us? An asshole who wasn't even voted into office taking over so that he can kill to make more money for his family. Or laws to be passed only to be overturned by whatever side has the corporation with the most money. Either you can have your spirit smashed over and over by the current state of the world, or you can create something for your friends and loved ones. I feel uncomfortable discussing the politics of the movement. I'll leave that to someone else. I'm too busy making things to figure out *why* I am making them. But overall, yes, this is a political stance. If only to say 'fuck you' to complacency and people who think music doesn't matter if it's not being played on the radio; to say 'fuck you' to corporations who suck the magic out of life and music and to say 'fuck you' to our grotesque leaders who probably listen to The White Stripes behind the doors of their offices as they engage in orgies of blood, whores and money."

The day after the Scorces/Flaherty & Corsano show at the Free Folk Fest, Chris Corsano's bruised fists are another visceral reminder of just how committed these players are to diverting all of their reserves of anger, hope, power and belief into the physical act of creating a transcendent free music that spits in the face of a corrupt establishment. "You were at that show," the drummer explodes. "You saw what was happening. It makes my life better, it keeps me sane, seeing and playing music that gets to that level. I love it as a visceral thing, but when I think about it, I like the political model it represents, the idea of a lot of people trying to take care of each other without any pre-written laws, but at the same time it's not everybody for themselves. When it is, and when it's only that, then it's generally shitty improvised music. And that's generally what happens in the world, people just out for themselves. Out here we're trying to create a little model for how you can act with people, like, let's try and take care of each other and make something good out of it, accomplish things while always watching out for the other person. When I encountered this free music, it was the absolute embodiment of those ideas. It was as if everything reinforces everything else. Like your art reinforcing your politics reinforcing your art. And that's a good feeling when that happens." □

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Above: Ben Chasny, aka Six Organs Of Admittance and Comets On Fire.
Below: Christina Carter and Heather Leigh Murray, aka Scorces

30 CHUNKS O' WEIRDNESS

Black Twig Pickers *North Fork Flyer* CD (VHF)
Christina Carter *Bastard Wing* LP (Eclipse)
Tom Carter *Root King* LP (Eclipse)
Charalambides *CHT* CD (Wholly Other)
Comets On Fire *Field Recordings From The Sun* CD (Ba Da Bing!)
Cul De Sac *Ecim* CD (Capella)
Death Of The Sun CD (Strange Attractors)
Double Leopards *A Pebble In Thousands Of Unmapped Revolutions* LP (Eclipse)
Paul Flaherty *Voices* CD (Wet Paint)
Paul Flaherty/Chris Corsano *The Hated Music* CD (Ecstatic Yod)
Dredd Foole *In Quest Of Tense* CD (Forced Exposure)
The Whys Of Fire CD (Ecstatic Yod)
Fursaxa *Fursaxa* LP (Ecstatic Peace)
Jackie-O Motherfucker *Change* CD (Textile)
Joshua *Gold Cosmos* CD/LP (Feather One's Nest)
Heather Leigh Murray *Cuatro/Vocal Recordings July 2002* CD-R (Heatherleighcreative)
The No-Neck Blues Band *Ever Borneo!* LP (Seres)
Sticks And Stones Will Break My Bones But Names Will Never Hurt Me CD (Soundatone/Revenant)
Pelt *Pearls From The River* CD/LP (VHF)
Jack Rose *Red Horse, White Mule* LP (Eclipse)
Scorces *Vivre Avec La Bete* LP (Eclipse)
Six Organs Of Admittance *Dark Noontide* CD (Holy Mountain)
Dust & Chimes CD (Holy Mountain)
Son Of Earth-Flesh On Bone/Double Leopards *s/t* LP (Apostasy)
Sunburned Hand Of The Man *Jaybird* CD-R/LP (Manhand/Qbico)
The Trickle-Down Theory Of Lord Knows What LP (Eclipse)
The Tower Recordings *Folk Scene* LP/CD (Shrat Field Recordings/Communion)
The Futuristic Folk Of The Tower Recordings CD (Child Of Microtones)
Matthew Valentine *I Burned One w/God* CD-R (Child Of Microtones)
The MV & EE Medicine Show *Tonight! One Night Only! MV & EE In Heaven* LP (Time-Lag)

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